

Inside MPR

Gestation of a documentary

The work table in the KSJN newsroom is covered with tapes and pieces of paper. A dark haired bearded man picks up a tape, carries it over to the tape editing machine and scratches his head while he listens to it. He runs around the table, reading several scraps of paper, listens to several more tapes, and does a great deal more head scratching. The dance is repeated for hours, even days. Gradually the piles of tapes are rearranged and more words appear on more pieces of paper. Greg Barron's latest documentary is taking shape.

The production, a sound portrait of prairies in Minnesota, will be aired on MPR stations November 14 at 7 pm. The broadcast is the culmination of months of research, interviewing, taping and editing.

A documentary begins with what Barron calls "a gem of an idea that has to grow in my mind." He uses the term "gestation" to describe the growth period: "Every time I've produced a documentary it's been like I imagine it is for a woman carrying a child."

Earlier this year he happened to stop by the Nature Conservancy where he talked with people who were interested in prairies in Minnesota. While the idea of trying to capture the essence of the prairie in sound was growing, Barron met Peter Lehenhard Braun, a producer and writer with the German National Radio who uses a synthesis of traditional documentary style and sound as an art medium.

In explaining how his conversations with Braun led to the conception of the documentary, Barron compared traditional radio with a truck used to carry "words and ideas, assertions and facts." This documentary is different. "The idea in this case is something like a sports car," he says, "capable of carrying some things, but built for beauty. It has esthetic qualities a truck cannot."

To capture the sounds — birds, mammals, insects, and farming — Barron and Engineer David Felland made numerous trips to the prairie, getting up early in the morning and sometimes spending 16 hours in the field. It often took several hours of tape to get a minute or two of the exact sound they wanted.

"It's hard to find a large track of prairie that isn't near man-made sounds," Barron explained. His recordings were frequently interrupted by sounds of jets overhead or tractors in the next field.

To get five minutes of cricket sounds, Barron and Felland spent an entire evening

crawling around a marsh until they could place microphones near two individual crickets. Prairie inhabitants were not always cooperative. Another time they found a marsh alive with the sound of birds. By the time they were able to set up the equipment, it was dark and the birds had stopped singing.

The MPR crew took microphones to places most of their audience will never visit, such as the middle of a buffalo herd. Because they could not get out of their car in the buffalo reserve in Blue Mound State Park, they had to use a 12-foot telescoping pole with a mike on the end. The curious buffalo were intrigued by the strange object.

Because the aural quality is especially important in this production, special stereo equipment was used to capture the truest sound possible. "Sound has emotional content," says Barron. "Pure sound without vision forces the ears to focus on every intimation."

Even with the most modern, sophisticated equipment, Barron and Felland had to improvise. Actual wind, for example, does not sound like wind on tape. It produces a rattling sound that can ruin a tape of the intended subject. This became a serious problem until one day Barron was seen in the newsroom carrying two huge canvas stretchers and asking colleagues for old sheets. His handmade wind baffles solved the interference problem. Ironically, when he wanted wind sounds, he had to simulate them.



Engineer David Felland and Producer Greg Barron record sounds for Barron's documentary on the prairie to be broadcast this month. (Photo by Jim Brandenburg; reprinted from the Worthington Daily Globe.)

Once the taping is complete, the task of putting the documentary together begins. Although he usually has some idea of the final form from the beginning, Barron also lets the piece "grow organically" as he goes along. Unexpected sounds may trigger more ideas for more sounds. While the general structure suggests certain sounds and information, material gleaned in the field may change the final structure.

So it is with the narration. Words will trigger a search of the tapes for just the right sound. A sound will turn the mind inward seeking the right words to blend it together with the whole piece.

Explaining this state of production, Barron returns to the metaphor of childbirth. "You wonder if the child will be deformed, or good looking but not too bright."

After the material is selected and edited and the narration written, Barron and Felland again team up for a half dozen or more final mixing sessions. There may be 20 or more takes of a 60 second segment. Cues must be exact; pace, volume, timing and sound texture must be precise. "The technical director is extremely important at this point," Barron says.

How does it feel when the work is finished and the broadcast is over? "Wonderful and painful," he sighs. "The child has grown up and gone. You're exhausted, but there is a need to go find another subject and tell another story."

Barb Hunter